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ABSTRACT

The influence of social class on students' entrance to graduate and professional education was examined by analyzing data from a large longitudinal sample. Students who did not go on to further study tended to come from less affluent and less well educated families, while students who went to professional schools came from wealthier and better educated families. Students from wealthier families pursued advanced study more frequently than others, even when undergraduate grades were statistically controlled. Students from wealthier homes were also more likely to follow through with their senior plans for advanced study, especially in law and medicine. (Author/MSE)

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The Influence of Social Class on Entrance to Graduate and Professional School

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Is there any truth in Sarte's remark that the Ph.D. is given in America as a reward for having a wealthy father and no opinions? The effects of social class and income have been related to the attendance of college during the undergraduate years in many studies. These studies show that lower family income and lower class origins seem to lead to a lower attendance rate than would be expected on the basis of ability (Clark, 1964; Baird, 1976). Do these factors also influence attendance and retention in graduate school? Earlier research, such as Davis (1965), showed that students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds more often planned to enter advanced study immediately. Miller (1963) followed the same students a year later, and found that students' family backgrounds did not appear to have much effect on the implementation of their plans for attendance in graduate or professional school. Grigg (1965) reached similar conclusions. However, there is little recent information about the extent to which social class influences attendance in graduate or professional school.

The purpose of this study is to analyze information from a large, recent sample of college seniors, who were followed-up a year later to answer three questions? (1) Do students from low SES backgrounds attend graduate and professional school as frequently as students from high SES backgrounds do?; (2) Does the influence of social class vary by level of academic ability?; and (3) Among seniors who planned to continue their education the next year, does social class influence the extent to which students follow through with their plans?

Data sources. The data for this study comes from a follow-up of a national survey of a sample of college seniors who replied to a questionnaire, The College Senior Survey, in the spring of 1971 (Baird, Clark, & Hartnett, 1973). Some 7,734 seniors in 94 colleges across the country were followed up in late spring of 1972 to determine their activities. Analyses indicated the sample included proportionately slightly fewer minority students than did the nonrespondents, but the sample did not seem to be biased in any other way, and included an extremely wide variety of students.

The Senior Survey covered a great deal of biographical, personal, attitudinal and educational information about students, including their specific plans for study the next year (Baird, Clark, & Hartnett, 1973). The follow-up questionnaire ascertained students' educational and vocational activities, including their specific fields of study (Baird, 1974).

Method. To answer the first question above, the simple frequencies and percentages of students from families of differing incomes and parental education in each form of postgraduate activity were compared. To answer the second question, the percentages of students with differing family incomes and differing

grades who were in some form of postgraduate education were calculated. To answer the third question, we compared the percentages of students from different SES groups who had planned to pursue graduate or professional education in specific fields who were actually doing so a year later. The overall percentages of those who had planned to pursue advanced study, who were in some form of advanced study were also compared. Standard survey comparison techniques (Simon, 1971) were used in all analyses.

Results

The SES of students' families, as measured by parental education and income, was related to students' postgraduate activities as shown in Table 1. On each measure, students who worked, married, or entered the military service tended to come from relatively low SES families, graduate students from slightly higher SES families, and law and medical students from the highest SES families. This general pattern of differences also held for men and women in the various groups. It is easy to see that the capacity of families to support their children would be related to their educational careers and that well-educated parents would have high expectations for their children. In fact, one might have expected the differences to be even greater considering the importance of these variables at earlier education decision points (e.g., Sewell, 1971).

The extent of the influence of social class compared to that of academic success can be seen in Table 2. Although the relationship is complex, it is clear that students from wealthier homes generally are more likely to attend graduate or professional school, whatever their grades. Although the students from the homes with lowest incomes are more eligible for scholarships and loans than their wealthier classmates, these aids could not overcome their families lack of resources. For example, among the B+ students, those from the wealthiest families were nearly twice as likely to attend graduate or professional school than those from the poorest homes. Among the A to A+ students, students from families with incomes of $20,000 or more were half again as likely to go on to advanced study as students from families with incomes of $5,000 to $7,999.

It may surprise some readers to find that so many students with undergraduate grades of C and below and C+ were attending graduate or professional school. Although some of these students were actually in nonacademic and technical schools, and other were in undemanding fields, a surprising number were in regular academic programs. Some of these students had attended very selective undergraduate schools, and others had high test scores although they had not put forth the effort needed to get good grades as undergraduates.

Do students from families of different income and educational levels follow through with their plans to the same extent? Overall, our calculations indicated that students from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to be in the field they had planned to enter, and they were more likely to be in some form of advanced study. The overall rates mask some important differences between fields, however. Students from wealthier homes implemented their plans to attend medical school considerably more often than students from poor homes. Although the same was generally true for law, the figures suggest that the

students in the lowest income category may have more access to financial aid than students from middle-income or upper-income families. To some degree this may be due to special scholarship programs for minority students. In contrast, family income was not particularly related to students' implementation of their plan in graduate fields.

Beyond parental income and education, the degree of family encouragement of advanced study was strikingly different for students with different post-college careers. Compared to other students, the seniors who did not continue to advanced study were less often encouraged to go on by their parents. The students who went to graduate school reported considerably more encouragement, and students who studied law or medicine reported even more encouragement.

Discussion

We found that the traditional obstacles to students from poor backgrounds still seem to exist to some degree. Less privileged students planned to continue their educations a little less often than more privileged students, and when they did plan to go on, they did not as often follow through with their plans. The advantage of the more privileged was strongest in the professional fields of medicine, law, and business. Despite recent advances, the need for financial aid, counseling and information about low cost programs remains, particularly in the more costly professional programs. Perhaps there simply needs to be more aid available, or at least more made accessible. In analyses reported elsewhere (Baird, 1974), we found that graduate and professional students strongly agreed that some improvements in financing should be made. They would favor "something like the Yale plan," by which students would pledge some percentage of their future incomes to meet their present needs, and package arrangements of scholarships, loans, and jobs. They would like to see more emphasis on need in awarding scholarships and assistantships. They would like to see tuition lowered. All of these results suggest that graduate and professional school students would like to see greater and more readily available financial aid so they could pursue their studies without financial stress. Perhaps a national aid program, something like the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program at the undergraduate level could be developed at the graduate level. However, given the current disenchantment with higher education, this appears unlikely in the immediate future.

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Table 1

SES Characteristics of Students Pursuing Different Activities After College

Characteristic	Post-Graduation Activity								
	Work	Military Service	Marriage	Grad. Arts Humanities	Grad. Bio. Phys. Science	Grad. Soc. Science	Law School	Medical School	Other Prof. School
Father's education									
Less than high school diploma	24	22	20	15	15	19	8	11	16
High school	28	28	23	23	23	20	22	17	24
Some college	18	17	15	20	18	18	18	16	18
College graduation	15	15	18	19	19	19	22	22	21
Graduate or professional degree	14	17	23	22	25	24	30	35	21
Mother's education									
Less than high school diploma	18	13	17	10	12	15	6	6	10
High school	40	43	26	35	35	34	31	34	38
Some college	20	22	23	23	21	23	24	25	22
College graduation	16	15	26	21	21	20	29	25	18
Graduate or professional degree	6	8	7	11	11	8	10	10	11
Family income									
Less than $5,000	6	5	7	6	4	5	3	2	5
$5,000 to $7,999	10	12	6	7	10	7	4	4	9
$8,000 to $11,999	24	19	20	18	21	20	12	16	19
$12,000 to $19,999	26	33	27	24	31	24	26	26	28
$20,000 or more	21	19	23	27	24	30	43	41	28

Table 2

Percentage of Students from Families with Different Incomes Enrolled in Graduate or Professional School According to Undergraduate Grades

Family Income	C, Below	C+	B	B+	A to A+
Less than $5,000	19	21	29	30	54
$5,000 to $7,999	12	23	26	31	46
$8,000 to $11,999	9	15	35	37	56
$12,000 to $19,999	10	21	40	43	60
$20,000 and more	10	26	41	56	68